



MAP ACADEMY

Education Disruption Podcast / 6.11.2020

[Episode 15: Meeting Students' Needs So They Can Succeed](#)

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Nick: [00:00:00] Students drop out of high school for all kinds of reasons.

Rachel: It can be mental health. It can be environmental.

Josh: Behavioral issues, the way those behavioral issues were handled.

Rachel: It can be having to work. It can be substance use.

Josh: Things going on at home, the academic sequence just moving too fast, and they feel lost.

Nick: Unfortunately for some, they have many factors causing them to drop out.

Hayden: I got absolutely no support. I was bullied. I was in at hospitals. **[00:00:30]** There was no support for me.

Nick: I'm going to talk to a student—

Hayden: I'm Hayden Panzera, and I am a student at Map Academy.

Nick: —about why traditional public school didn't work for him and how he got back on track at a high school that does things differently. We caught up with Hayden before the pandemic to talk about how he found his way to Map Academy. A quick warning before we dig in, some strong language is used. Hayden is 22.

Hayden: I left school when I was 16. I started getting bullied pretty young because I was born **[00:01:00]** mentally ill. Obviously, I'd react different to other kids. I was already different than other kids. I was a target that was easy to make fun of me, it set me off. It wasn't even so much what they were saying, just the fact that it wouldn't stop and no one cared.

Nick: Not only was Hayden coping with his own mental health issues outside of school, but school itself became its own source of trauma. The public high school Hayden was attending wasn't helping much.

Hayden: Their solution and advice was just to ignore it. **[00:01:30]** I wasn't being physically targeted. I wasn't being hate-crimed against or anything like that. It was just people making fun of me, and their advice was just, "Whatever. We can't do anything about it." There were no bullying laws back then. The side effect was just more anger and more depression and more anxiety.

I was either leaving school at the middle of lunch, sitting in the bathroom all day, not going to school at all. I was self-harming. I was [00:02:00] doing drugs. There was one teacher, not only a teacher, she was a guidance and counselor, and she really did try her best, but by the time she noticed, there was nothing she could have done.

Josh: Traditional high schools is a tough place to be.

Interviewer: That's Josh, co-founder of Map Academy, the school Hayden currently attends.

Josh: More often than not, there's a huge opportunity gap. Whether it's related to after-school activities or mental health accessibility. A lot of the students that [00:02:30] we find come to Map Academy have had such a negative relationship with school that it's tough to rebound from.

Rachel: And the way that the traditional high school experience works.

Nick: That's Rachel, also co-founder of Map Academy.

Rachel: If you fall behind first semester of freshman year and if you get off-sequence or off-timeline, even the most well-meaning adults, and there are many, I think most adults that work in education are well-meaning, but they're [00:03:00] stuck in these little boxes that make it almost impossible for them to help someone like Hayden or anyone else, to find hope again that it could get better.

Hayden: I felt as supported as I could with a public school that wasn't trained or equipped in any way to deal with someone who was constantly in psychiatric hospitals and was in the special needs program and stuff like that. They did what they could, but it wasn't enough to keep me in.

Nick: Students who [00:03:30] fall off that traditional pathway tend to find each other.

Hayden: All my friends were either working all the time, or they were still in school or starting college. It was like there's nothing to do but hang out with other dropouts and kids who weren't working and drink.

Rachel: It's a network of — it really is. It's a sad, very real culture of hopelessness. [00:04:00] We get a lot of referrals from other students. We get a lot of referrals by word of mouth from that web of like, "Oh, I have this friend."

Josh: Us and our staff are always out at local restaurants. Unfortunately, it's if you drop out of high school, you're going to either be working at a local restaurant or a fast-food joint or Dunkin Donuts, Walmart, Market Basket. There's places that we go, you run into students who you know. [00:04:30] At this point, now that we're an operational school, we have word of mouth of our current students. They have friends who have dropped out of high school.

Nick: For students like Hayden, the logistics of re-engaging in high school are only part of the issue. The bigger part is all the trauma that these students have associated with school doesn't just go away after they leave.

Hayden: There's this adult life program that I went to for about five minutes and then realized, "Absolutely not," and just went home. I left school and then thought that "Oh, this was it. There's nothing, all [00:05:00] the bad's over." Then I tried to go back to school and realized that that's not the case at all.

Maxanne: Whether it's actually because of their learning or because of experiences that happened at school—

Nick: That's Maxanne, a social worker at Map Academy.

Maxanne: —or the way they were spoken to by teachers or support staff or interactions with students, they just hate the whole idea of a school and that structure like it's just going to be bad. It can't work. Once it's broken down, it really can work. It sounds so basic, but we believe in the relationship first and connection. We cannot instruct **[00:05:30]** students to do algebra, complete US history, too, read a novel if they have a list of traumas. They're homeless, they have no food, they don't know what condition their parents are going to be in when they get home.

Hayden: Especially in public schools, where there's hundreds, maybe even thousands, of students, you never know what's going on in that student's life. It just has never really made sense to me that teachers think that life outside of school should just be left at the door. **[00:06:00]** What you're going through outside of school is going to impact how you're going to work in school. If you are depressed and you want to kill yourself, obviously, when you come to school, you're not going to do your work, and you're not going to care. Teachers shouldn't just be like, "Oh, you need to leave that the door" because you can't just leave suicidal ideation at the door.

Josh: It's really hard to focus on school if you don't know where you're going to sleep at night. It's really hard to focus on school if you don't know if your mom or dad are going to be home at night. It's really hard to focus on school if you don't have a mom and dad **[00:06:30]** at home. The list goes on and on and on for reasons why the traditional high school experience doesn't work for students with mental health issues.

Nick: For Hayden, a pressure-free and supportive work environment based on relationships makes all the difference.

Hayden: I'm always being told to get work done, but it's not like at school where if you didn't do something, you would get punished for or you would get attention or you'd fail something. It's like, "Well, you didn't do something today. Just try again tomorrow."

Nick: That pressure-free **[00:07:00]** work environment that's based on relationships actually helped Hayden to understand that he likes learning.

Hayden: Well, Map has enabled me to start liking or rather loving to learn because I can learn what I want. You know what I mean? Obviously, I have my tracker of what I need to pass, but I also have things like Shawn giving me creative writing assignments. I have Abby helping me with math and stuff like that like. I just have—

Nick: Hayden, **[00:07:30]** and all the other students at Map, refer to teachers by their first name, and that's another difference in the student-teacher relationship at Map.

Hayden: —Marcy saying that I can do a PowerPoint presentation or illustrate a children's book for science on medical conditions that I have. That's really cool.

Rachel: It's our job as adults to assess the situation and give space for the learner to be in control. If it's a good day, then we're pushing harder. If it's not a good day, **[00:08:00]** then it's just a day.

Josh: We have to get away from this notion of academic, academic, academic is number one. Well, for some of the students that we serve, academic is not number one, and we're pretty

outward about that. We build relationships with students and families. We give them the patience until they're ready to make academics [crosstalk]

Hayden: It makes it a lot easier because if I know I'm having a bad day, I have the support from the teachers that I need.

Rachel: Just at the heart of all of this is [00:08:30] really about finding a way to pair high-quality personal relationships with high expectations. That's the capital upon which a school like ours runs is finding adults that have that ability to see the point because just relationships by themselves aren't enough and just high expectations aren't enough, either. You can have all the high expectations in the world, if you don't have the relationship, that kid will never meet them. You can have all the positive relationships in the world, but if you don't have high expectations, the kid's never going to grow.

Hayden: None of the teachers here are going to [00:09:00] dismiss anything I'm going through or make it seem like that my work will always be more important than what I'm going through on the outside world. None of the students here are going to bully me for no fucking reason, you know what I mean. It's not any other school I went to, they're not the same people anyway. The setup isn't even the same. It's not the other schools I went to. [00:09:30]

[music]

Maxanne: For the first time in his life, he's actually future-oriented. He never thought about his future. He didn't ever have hopes or dreams or a belief that he could do anything as he was [crosstalk]

Nick: Then, Maxanne starts to explain to me that for [00:10:00] students that have very little exposure to emotions like joy or excitement, they often confuse these positive feelings for anxiety and fear or uncertainty.

Maxanne: There's so much uncertainty that is actually excitement that he's feeling and possibility and hope and that it's not really anxiety and negativity, but those feelings and those emotions are confused sometimes. Because he's never, for whatever reasons, experienced that positive excitement and joy, [00:10:30] he thinks he's continuing with anxiety.

We talked a lot about the school phobia and reframing that in that it's now not so much the school phobia but that he actually likes coming here, so his anxiety is really around those friendships and connections he's making and what if they don't work out as opposed to but it's all in school, so it's all associated as one big thing.

Hayden: I want to graduate. That's it. I just want to graduate. [00:11:00] I had and I still have, obviously, faith that Map Academy will work out for me.

Maxanne: Once it's broken down, it really can work, and students can learn and succeed and have hope and dreams of the future things that they can actually achieve that when they come in, they don't think they can even read a book, never mind go to college or buy a house. [00:11:30]

[music]

Hayden: I'm almost done. I'm projecting to graduate in June.

[music]

Nick: This brings us to present day. Map Academy has been closed for the rest of the academic year, like most schools around the country. We caught up with Hayden to see how it's going.

Hayden: At first, it was really hard. I don't do well with really major sudden change at all, so the first couple of weeks, probably upwards to like a month, [00:12:00] I was struggling hard. It was getting to the point where I was questioning whether or not I would have to go inpatient because my depression was that bad, but then I started adjusting to the change, and I was able to get myself into, somewhat, a routine every day so I can keep the routine going even if it's not my normal routine.

I wake up, I have coffee, I do some yoga and meditation. Then I try to get some school work done before the community meeting, really just [00:12:30] schoolwork. Personal growth is on my schedule list.

Nick: I asked Hayden, what's it like to be graduating under these circumstances?

Hayden: It fucking sucks. I'm 23 and I'm graduating during a pandemic. It sucks. I'm glad I'm graduating but good lord. I'm only disappointed that I'm not going to have the actual graduation on time, but it's always been more about just finishing than the actual [00:13:00] graduation celebration itself, but it does suck. I'm happy to be finishing.

[music]

Nick: Hayden is just one of the many inspiring stories from Map Academy, a high school that puts students at the center, based in Plymouth, Massachusetts. We hope to bring you some more of these inspiring stories.

Hayden: Make sure you subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts, leave us a rating, and most importantly, tell a friend who might also [00:13:30] enjoy the show.

[music]

Rachel: Hey, this is Rachel, co-founder of Map Academy. As you can probably tell from that episode, Map is a really unique school, and we're constantly looking for new talent to join our team. If you or someone you know works in education and wants to make a difference, check out our website, themapacademy.org, and take a look at our careers page. From there, [00:14:00] you can check out current openings, our staff referral program, and find a forum to get in touch.

We're always looking for talented teachers and youth development staff that are ready to do high school differently and serve the students that find their way to us. Thanks for listening.